

CHRIS GRANET walks on the wild side in American cowboy country

A big yee hah, Utah!

A VAST panoramic desert landscape stretched out before us and a monstrously big sky loomed above.

For the next three hours there was nothing but stunning natural beauty as far as the eye could see.

It was relentless, ridiculous even. Just craggy mountains, canyons and gorges.

Rock spires, monoliths and all manner of fantastical red rock formations slowly set ablaze by the setting sun.

I consider myself well travelled but I've never seen anywhere like this. This is one of America's best kept secrets. This is Utah.

"Utah?", laughed a friend of mine from New York. "Why the hell are you going there? Isn't it just fields and religious nuts?"

He meant the Mormons, the controversial, conservative and supposedly polygamist followers of the Church of the Latter Day Saints - which the majority of Utahns are.

Other than them, and maybe The Osmonds, little is known about this land-locked state.

Surprisingly, I didn't meet many while I was there (Mormons, not Osmonds). Unsurprisingly, the few I did were down-to-earth, friendly and disappointingly monogamous.

The state tourist board steers clear of religion, instead billing itself as a paradise for outdoor enthusiasts who enjoy winter sports, hiking and climbing. And being larger than Great Britain, with a population of only 2.6 million, there's plenty of outdoors to play in.

PINE TREE CANYON

It's surprising how geographically diverse it is. Landing in Salt Lake City, we flew over the marshy edges of the immense salt flats and lake that gives the city its name. Then over the course of our road trip, the scenery went from alpine peaks to rocky desert.

The food also was surprisingly good. Hearty and wholesome, an interesting blend of traditional American and Tex-Mex. The steak was so good I probably got through half a buffalo during my stay.

Our first stop was the Heber Valley in the Wasatch mountains (part of the Rockies) that form a spectacular backdrop to Salt Lake City. Up there, Swiss-style houses nestle in a landscape of meadows, valleys and mountains.

Nearby is Park City, a popular ski resort that hosted the 2002 Winter Olympics.

We stayed at the lovely Swiss lodge-themed Zermatt Resort and Spa with its own hilariously knickerbockered bellboys. There

was horse riding and swimming at underground hot springs on offer, but instead I had an embarrassingly inept attempt at fly fishing.

From there we headed south via the winding roads of the pine tree-coated Provo canyon.

The further we drove, the more open and parched the landscape became until it opened up into proper cowboy country - wide,

high plains, dead straight roads and super-sized trucks roaring past.

THELMA AND LOUISE

For lunch we stopped at the wonderfully rough-and-ready Ray's Tavern in Green River, a cool, semi-dilapidated town that is pure Americana.

We ate homemade burgers and fries and played pool next to a juke box blaring country music. A few hours later we were on top of Dead Horse Point State Park, a horseshoe-shaped plateau overlooking Canyonlands National Park.

The view from the cliffs that plunged 2,000ft to the coiling green Colorado River was breathtaking.

It was here the final scene of the movie *Thelma and Louise* was filmed, when they supposedly drive into the Grand Canyon. I admit it's a spectacular place to die.

Next up was the nearby Arches National Park. More than 2,000 natural sandstone arches and fin-like rock formations balance on other pinnacles. This was also absurdly beautiful, as is most of southern Utah.

It requires a lot of time to see it all properly, but with limited time, the best itinerary would be a loop via Las Vegas and The Grand Canyon on the other side of the state border.

One must is Moab, a cosmopolitan little tourist town next to Arches with a lively main street and several late-night bars playing live music. After some fine tacos and tequila cocktails at Miguel Baja Mexican



restaurant we sat in the Slickrock bar watching the drunk barmaids dancing, singing and heckling an equally drunk musician. It made getting up at dawn the next day for our Colorado River rafting trip that bit harder.

Coffee and bagels cleared my head, but not the ominously moody sky. It hadn't rained for six weeks, yet as soon as the Brits

boarded the dinghy the heavens duly opened.

Once we'd run the rapids and the extreme buzz subsided, the driving rain left us shivering to the bone on the stretch of water where we should have been diving in to cool off from the blazing sun.

The weather for our San Juan River tour the next day was slightly

better. Here, by the Arizona border, the rain held off until lunch, allowing us time to see ancient native American rock paintings and ruins before a dirty dark sky fell on our heads.

After two hours of rain we arrived at our next destination, the town of Mexican Hat, and sure enough the sun returned.

From there we got back on the road. And what a road it was - the Moki Dugway, seriously steep and winding with a gob-smacking vista. There was the Valley of the Gods on one side, and the Monument Valley in the distance on the other - the pinnacle of the harsh yet magical scenery. The other highways we took continued in similar vein until the sun finally set and we arrived in Torrey,

our stop for the night.

A hike the next morning through Sulphur Creek in the nearby Capitol Reef National Park was followed by lunch in a genteel little park with deer. It was a far cry from when the area was a hideout for Butch Cassidy and his Wild Bunch.

Everywhere had proved to be so

beautiful, laid back and friendly. I couldn't understand Utah's lack of popularity. Maybe it's because it doesn't have the glitz and glamour the USA is known for. Or perhaps the locals want to keep it a secret.

If that's the case, then don't go to Utah. I hear Florida's wonderful this time of year.

Butch Cassidy and his Wild Bunch hid out here

● ● ● **NEED TO KNOW..**

Utah Office of Tourism:
www.utah.travel

Return flights from London Heathrow to Salt Lake City with United start from £470

Zermatt Resort and Spa, Heber Valley: www.zermattresort.com

Double rooms for two people sharing start from £90

Sherri Griffith Expeditions, Moab, for rafting on the Colorado River. One day cost around £95.
www.griffithexp.com

Miguel's Baja Grill, Moab:
www.miguelsbajagrill.com

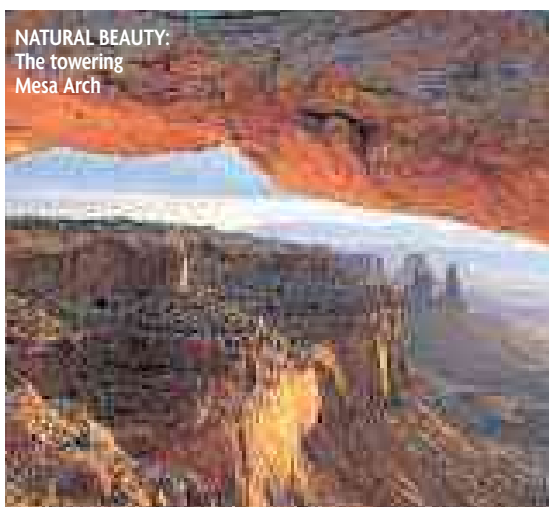
Moab Brewery, micro-brewery, restaurant and pub:
www.themoabbrewery.com

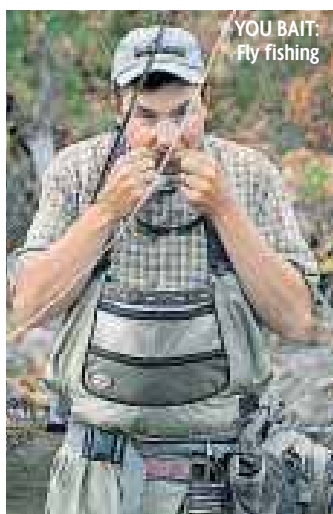
The scenery went from alpine peaks to rocky desert

AN URBAN OASIS:
Salt Lake City



NATURAL BEAUTY:
The towering
Mesa Arch

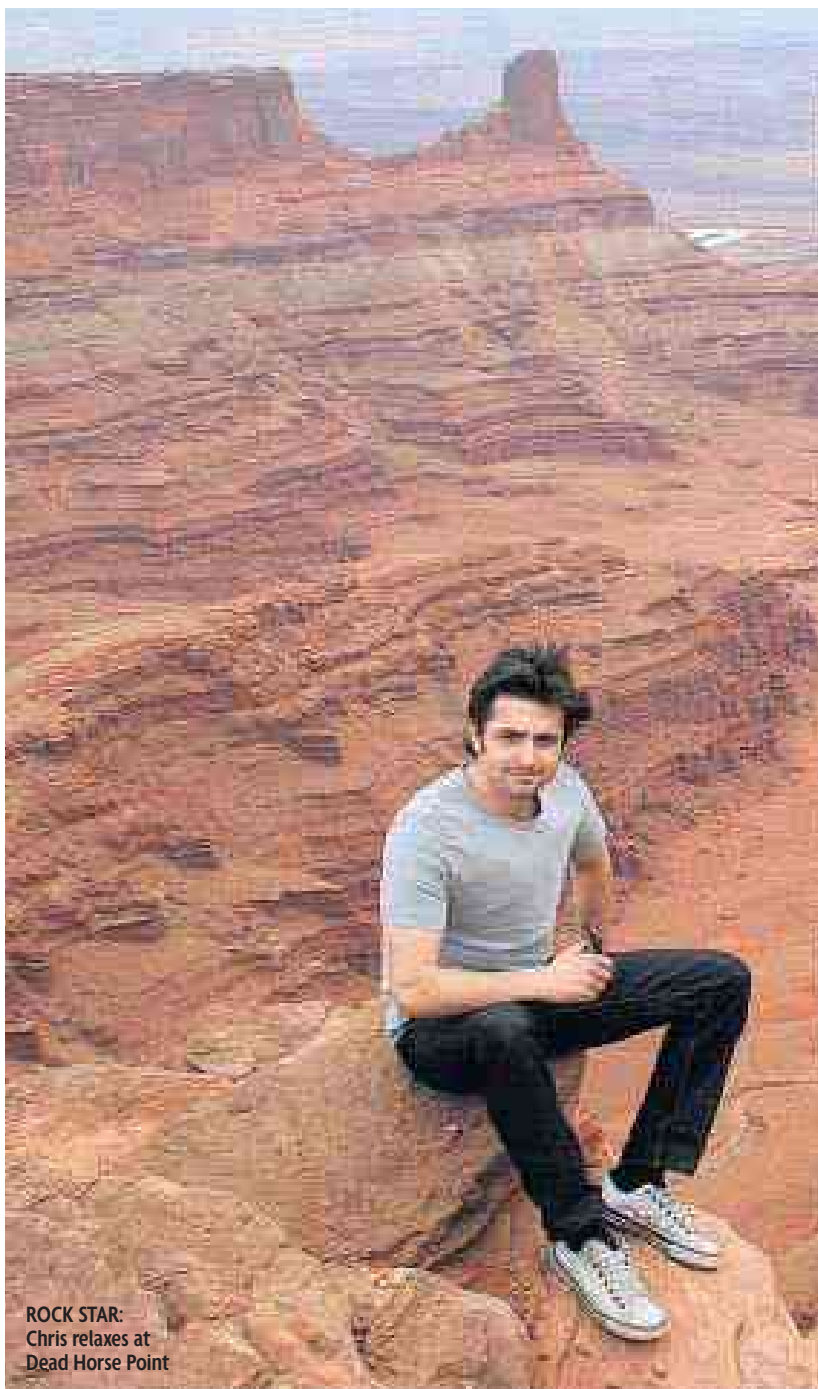




YOU BAIT:
Fly fishing



RAPID PROGRESS:
Rafting on the
Colorado River



ROCK STAR:
Chris relaxes at
Dead Horse Point